STUDIO IN THE WOODS

Fixtures of the downtown New York fashion scene, the Proenza Schouler designers Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez retreat to 100 quiet acres in the Berkshires to create their collections in splendid isolation.

By Mickey Rapkin

The early-Americana wall hangings, the perfect pot of coffee brewing on this crisp Berkshire mountains morning. The newly expanded kitchen with a retrofitted French draper's table from the 1800s. The tepee standing on the lawn. It's a different kind of Proenza Schouler show than we're used to, though no less hip for being so square.

Jack McCollough (dressed in Raf Simons) and Lazaro Hernandez (in azure chinos tucked into L. L. Bean hiking boots) sit in the living room of the Lincoln-era farmhouse they bought a few years ago on a whim, talking about the simple pleasures of eating vegetables out of their own garden.

"It's so satisfying," McCollough says.

"I prefer tractors," Hernandez says, interjecting. "I kind of like — "

"Oh, you're so butch!"

"I do!" Hernandez insists.

"Let's keep in mind, I taught you how to use that tractor."

If the Proenza Boys, as they're often called, needed a little lo-fi escape, who could blame them? Their origin story is now a thing of legend: two doe-eyed designers meet at Parsons, teaming up for a 2002 senior collection so fully formed that Barneys buys the entire lot. The press fawns. Valentino infuses millions in cash.

Ten years later Proenza Schouler is in the midst of a very real, very ambitious growth spurt. New investors — Andrew Rosen (a co-founder of Theory) and John Howard (who helped boost profits at Rag & Bone) — came on board in 2011 with an eye toward elevating the brand to the level of a European-style mega-house. The label opened its first retail store on Madison Avenue last summer, and a SoHo shop is percolating, along with another four or five outposts in Asia. In December, the company signed a licensing deal with Iris S.p.A. (the Italian firm that does footwear for Marc Jacobs and Jil Sander) to expand its shoe business into a broader collection that will include lower priced offerings.

As their company grew, the couple, whose romantic life has been as scrutinized as their collections, found they needed a salve for the bruising Manhattan fashion whirl. "Working in the city has just become really intense," Hernandez says, reclining into a Sérgio Rodrigues chair from the 1950s.

"Everyone was just going out all the time. And it became a lot to deal with." Dinner turned into a cameo at a party and then, oops, it was 4 in the morning. Sometimes they went straight into the office when the sun came up. "That's what your 20s are about," McCollough says. "Then you turn 30 and you're a little more tired and you're over that vibe a little bit and that scene, and you're ready for a new chapter."

Industry watchers assumed the next chapter would be set in Europe, where previous American enfants terribles like Marc Jacobs and Tom Ford freelanced spectacularly — and lucratively — for iconic brands. Opportunities certainly presented themselves, most recently with Dior in 2011, and while the designers decline to comment on that courtship specifically, McCollough allows that such offers are tempting.

But staring out at their property, Snow Farm — which they bought from Bob and Sue Tarasuk, who live on a farm across the road but still tend the grounds — it's not a stretch to say McCollough and Hernandez turned down the House of Dior because of this house. Or rather, what these 100 acres abutting a nature reserve represent: a flag planted firmly on the side of work-life balance. "We aren't ready to be living on a plane all the time," Hernandez says. "We don't need to sacrifice our lifestyle to that extent to make our life worth living or something."

"For what?" McCollough adds. "At the end of the day, really? I mean, I think we've got it so great. We have our own business. We have complete creative control. We can design the collection we want to design. It's what we're feeling. It's from our heart. We have time to have another type of life outside of that, on top of that." Later, he tells me: "This house has kind of saved us in a way."

It also provided them a creative space to sketch and strategize in a way they no longer can at work. "Our company vibe is very casual," Hernandez says. "The door is always open." Which workedwhen their company was 20 people. "Now it's 100 people walking into your office."

The two get to the farm at least three weekends a month, leaving their SoHo offices at 8 p.m. on a Friday and pulling into the driveway here by 11. As they wind up the road, there's a sigh of relief," McCollough says, his shoulders practically melting as he says the words. They'll cook dinner, with groceries from Guido's in Great Barrington, and then sleep until noon, stumbling downstairs for coffee and to let the dogs out. (Hernandez has a miniature pinscher named Jojo; McCollough's Newfoundland, Buster, looks like something out "Beasts of the Southern Wild.") But by 1 p.m. they're firmly seated at opposite ends of the farm table in their studio, sketching to Gram Parsons or John Phillips or some electronic music they've just downloaded. Still wearing sweatpants and slippers, they look like Wendy's Lost Boys but reimagined for the freethinking aughts. "We don't get dressed when we're here," Hernandez says.

They held off on a costly renovation until last year, working with the architect Calvert Wright to add an open kitchen with mile-long views onto the back of the house ("We'll never get back what we put in," McCollough says with a shrug) and a modest design studio in the driveway, where they can freely tack drawings and swatches and inspiration on the walls without fear of chipping the plaster.

Fall 2013 will be the first collection they designed in the studio — they previously sketched in the dining room. It's a slight departure from the spring 2013 runway show, a well-reviewed sea of Gerhard Richter-inspired patchwork and perforated leather patterns and abstract candy-colored prints based on Tumblr images. Fall 2013 is a touch quieter, the calm of a recent trip to New Zealand creeping in, they say. But their inspirations are varied and endless, never to be pigeonholed. French midcentury courtiers and Japanese silhouettes both are references. "There's a slight deconstructed feel to some of the pieces," McCollough says of the new collection. Hernandez adds the photographer John Divola's name to the conversation, citing his Zuma Series, 1970s-era California prints Hernandez describes as "these spray-painted graffiti things inside these beautiful rooms." They're pushing boundaries with fabrics, too, working with a mill overseas to engineer a tweed made from yarn woven through leather. There are also printed pony skins and lace embossed with leather, as well as a jacket made of ostrich skin bonded to nappa so the garment won't need a lining.

Every angle of the Proenza Schouler partnership has been debated and dissected, with people clamoring to know how they divide responsibilities, trying to figure out if one is the creative genius and one the baggage. But it's kind of like asking which leg is more important for sprinting. They each produce 100 sketches per season and then compare notes. After 10 years together, they now sketch drawings that would be impossible to tell apart if not for the heads. (McCollough draws his women in profile, Hernandez's face forward). As they rattle off influences, they pick up each others' dangling participles the way twins might. They even claim to split the driving, stopping at a gas station midway to swap. It's no surprise that when one lit up a cigarette over Thanksgiving — after a two-year hiatus — the other did as well. "I feel more creative when I'm smoking," McCollough says, "I'm not going to lie." Hernandez seems more embarrassed by the whole thing, shifting in his chair uncomfortably. "We're going to quit again," he says, sounding more like he's issued a royal decree than a bit of health-conscious encouragement. If they're feeling pressure to deliver bigger numbers for their investors, or another blockbuster like the PS1 bag, neither will admit it. Though perhaps it's telling that when the subject of what he'd do if they ever sold the company comes up, Hernandez takes a drag on a Marlboro Light and says he'd
like to make furniture: "Something where I wouldn't have to make a living doing it." When asked what the house feels like to him, he says plainly, "It feels like how life should be."

There's still work to be done on the farm; cows will soon graze the fields once a proper water source is installed, and the garden was just replanted. There's talk of epic pool parties in the summertime and late-night dance parties in a barely standing wooden shed on the back of the property. But McCollough and Hernandez seem intent on keeping this retreat the anti-Hamptons. They admit to sheepishly waving at fashion editors at the supermarket and then running home. A neighbor from way down the road once brought pies over as a housewarming present, and McCollough and Hernandez hid inside, pretending they weren't home. "We're a little weird up here," Hernandez says.

Whether or not it's related to the company's tightrope-walk expansion plans, the two appear to have inner peace on the brain — which is, perhaps, also what this house is about. McCollough's mother sends them gardening books. He also recently finished reading Ram Dass's seminal "Be Here Now," a yogi text about living in the present. Hernandez, meanwhile, is getting into meditation, something he learned from a shaman in Mexico. Twenty minutes of meditation makes him "much more mellow through the whole day," he says. "I'm not really the kind of person that gets emotional, but this helps me even more. It lets you be a little more even keeled." He describes it as "like working out. It's a technique. You sit there and not think."

"It's easier said than done," McCollough says.

Taking a cigarette break, they stare at a newly planted row of baby hedges and crab apple trees. "We're used to working really fast," Hernandez says. "We want to see it tomorrow, and we need this here in two weeks, and it's about now, now, now." But with gardening you can't have everything immediately. It's a fortifying test of patience, he says. "It teaches you how to wait."